JOAN OF THE SWORD HAND

By S. R. CROCKETT, Author of "The Raiders," &c.

CHAPTER XVII.

Wife and Priest.

"I have a right to call myself the widow of the Duke Henry of Kernsberg and Hohenstein," said Theresa von Lynar, in reply to Conrad's question as to whom he might thank for rescue and shelter.

"And therefore the [illegible] of the Duchess Joan?" he [illegible]

Theresa shook her [illegible]

"No," she said sadly; "I am not her mother, but—and even that only in a sense—her stepmother. A promise to a dead man has kept me from claiming any privileges save that of living unknown on this desolate isle of sand and mist. My son is an officer in the service of the Duchess Joan.

The face of the Prince-Bishop lighted up instantaneously.

"Most surely, then, I know him. Did he not come to Courtland with my Lord Dessauer, the Ambassador of Plasenburg?"

The lady of Isle Rugen nodded indifferently.

"Yes," she said; "I believe he went to Courtland with the embassy from Plassenburg."

"Indeed, I was much drawn to him," said the Prince eagerly; "I remember him most vividly. He was of an olive complexion, his features without color, but graven even as the Greeks cut those of a young god on a gem."

"Yes," said Theresa von Lynar serenely, "he has his father's face and carriage, which are those also of the Duchess Joan."

In the morning Joan came to bid the patient good morrow, while Werner von Orseln stood in the doorway with his steel cap doffed in his hand, and Boris and Jorian bent the knee for a priestly blessing. But Theresa did not again appear till night and darkness had wrapped the earth, and being all alone he listened to the heavy plunge of the breakers on the beach among which his life had been so nearly sped. The sound grew slower and slower after the storm, until at last the wavelets of that sheltered sea lapsed on the shingle in a sort of breathing whisper.

And so day passed and came again. Long nights, too, at first with hourly tendance and then presently without. But Joan sat no more with the young man after that first watch, though his soul longed for her, that he might again tell her that she was his brother's wife, and urge her to do her duty by him who was her wedded husband. So Conrad contented himself and salved his conscience by thinking austere thoughts of his mission and high place in the hierarchy of the only Catholic and Apostolic Church. So that presently he would rise up and seek Werner von Orseln in order to persuade him to let him go, that he might proceed to Rome at the command of the Holy Father, whose servant he was.

But Werner only laughed and put him off.

"When we have sure word of what your brother does at Kernsberg, then we will talk of this matter. Till then it cannot be hid from you that no hostage half so valuable can we keep in hold."

So after many days it was permitted to the Prince to walk abroad within the narrow bounds of the Isle Rugen, the Wordless Man guarding him at fifty paces' distance, impassive and inevitable as an ambulant rock of the seaboard.

As he went Prince Conrad's eyes glanced this way and that, looking for a means of escape. Yet they saw none, for Werner von Orseln with his ten men of Kernsberg and the two captains of Plassenburg were not soldiers to make mistakes. It chanced, however, that upon a warm and gracious afternoon, when the breezes

Glanced this way and that, looking for means of escape.

played wanderingly among the garden trees before losing themselves in the solemn aisles of the pines as in a pillared temple, that Conrad, stepping painfully westwards along the beach, arrived at the place of his rescue, and, descending the steep bank of shingle to look for any traces of the disaster, came suddenly upon the Duchess Joan gazing thoughtfully out to sea.

She turned quickly, hearing the sound of footsteps, and at sight of the Prince-Bishop glanced east and west along the shore as if meditating retreat.

But the proximity of Max Ulrich and the encompassing banks of water worn pebbles convinced her of the awkwardness, if not impossibility, of escape.

Conrad the prisoner greeted Joan with the sweet gravity which had been characteristic of him as Conrad the prince, and his eyes shone upon her with the same affectionate kindliness that had dwelt in them as he looked upon his sister in the pavilion of the rose-garden. But after one glance Joan looked steadily away across the steel-grey sea. Her feet turned instinctively to walk back towards the house and the Prince turned with her.

"If we are two fellow-prisoners," said Conrad, "we ought to see more of each other. Is it not so?"

"That we may concert plans of escape?" said Joan. "You desire to continue your pilgrimage, I to return to my people, who, alas, think themselves better off without me!"

They paced along together with their eyes on the ground, the Wordless Man keeping a uniform distance behind them. Then the Prince laughed a strange, grating laugh, like one who mocks at himself.

"The world is ill arranged," he said slowly; "my brother Louis would have made a far better Churchman than I. And strange it is to think that but a year ago the knights and chief councillors of Courtland came to me to propose that, because of his bodily weakness, my brother should be deposed and that I should take over the government and direction of affairs."

He went on without noticing the color rising in Joan's cheek, smiling a little to himself and talking with more animation.

"Then, had I assented, my brother might have been walking here with tonsured head by your side, while I would doubtless have been knocking at the gates of Kernsberg, seeking at the spear's point for a runaway bride."

"Nay!" cried Joan, with sudden vehemence; "that would you not—"

And as suddenly she stopped, stricken dumb by the sound of her own words.

The Prince turned his head full upon her. He saw a face all suffused with hot blushes, haughtiest pride struggling with angry tears in eyes that fairly blazed upon him, and a slender figure drawn up into an attitude of defiance, at sight of which something took him instantly by the throat.

"You mean—you mean—" he stammered, and for a moment was silent. "For God's sake, tell me what you mean!"

"I mean nothing at all!" said Joan, stamping her foot in anger.

And turning upon her heel she left him standing fixed in wonder and doubt upon the margin of the sea.

Then the wife of Louis, Prince of Courtland, walked eastward to the house upon the Isle Rugen with her face set as sternly as for battle, but her nether lip quivering, while Conrad, Cardinal and Prince of Holy Church, paced slowly to the west with a bitter and downcast look upon his ordinarily so sunny countenance.

For Fate had been exceeding cruel to these two.

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And meanwhile right haughtily flew the red lion upon the citadel of Kernsberg. Never had the Lady Duchess, Joan of the Sword Hand, approven herself so brave and determined. In her foresters' dress of green velvet, with the links of chain body-armor glinting beneath its frogs and taches, she went everywhere on foot. At all times of the day she was to be seen at the half-moons wherein the cannon were fixed, or on horseback scouring the defenced posts along the city wall. She seemed to know neither fear nor fatigue, and the noise of cheering followed her about the little hill city like her shadow.

Three there were who knew the truth—Peter Balta, Alt Pikker, and George the Hussite. And when the guards were set, the lamps lit, and the bars drawn, a stupid Hohensteiner set on watch at the turnpike foot with command to let none pass upon his life—then at last the lithe young Sparhawk would undo his belt with huge refreshful gusting of air into his lungs, amid the scarcely subdued laughter of the captains of the host.

Nevertheless, in the face of brave words and braver deeds, provisions waxed scarce and dear in Castle Kernsberg, and in the town below women grew gaunt and hollow-cheeked. Then the children acquired eyes that seemed to stand out of hollow purple sockets. Last of all, the stout burghers grew thin. And all three began to dream of the days when the good farmfolk of the blackened country down below them, where now stood the leafy lodges of the Muscovite and the white tents of the Courtlanders, used to come into Kernsberg to market, the great solemn-eyed oxen drawing carts full of country sausages, and brown meal fresh from the mill to bake the wholesome bread—or when the stout market-women brought in the lappered milk and the butter and curds. So the starving folk dreamed and dreamed and woke, and cried out curses on them that had waked them.

About this time the Sparhawk began to take counsel with himself, and the issue of his meditations the historian must now relate.

It was in the outer chamber of the Duchess Joan, which looks to the north, that the three captains usually sat—burly Peter Balta, stiff-haired, dry-faced, keen-eyed Alt Pikker, lean and leathery, the [illegible] humor within him all gone to fighting juice, his limbs mere bone and muscle, a certain acrid and caustic wit keeping the corner of his lips on the wicker, and, a little back from these two, George the Hussite, a smaller man, very solemn even when he was making others laugh, but nevertheless with a proud, high look, a stiff upper lip, and a mustache so huge that he could tie the ends behind his head on a windy day.

To them entered the Sparhawk, a settled frown of gloom upon his brow, and the hunger which he shared equally with the others already sharpening the falcon hook on his nose and whitening his thin nostrils.

At sight of him the three heads drew apart, and Alt Pikker began to speak of the stars that were rising in the eastern dusk.

"The dog-star is white," he said didactically. "In my schooldays I used

Joan looked steadily away across the steel-grey sea.

to read in the Latin tongue that it was red!"

"What is this?" cried the Sparhawk. "Do not deceive me. You were none of you talking of stars when I came up the stairs. For I heard Peter Balta's voice say, 'By God! it must come to it, and soon!' And you, Hussite George, answered him, 'Six days will settle it.' What do you keep from me? Out with it! Speak up, like three little men!"

It was Alt Pikker who first found words to answer.

"We spoke indeed of the stars, and said it was six days till the moon should be gone, and that the time would then be ripe for a sally by the —by the—Plassenburg gate!"

"Pshaw!" cried the Sparhawk. "Lie to your father confessor, not to me. I am not a purblind fool. I have [illegible] long enough, it is true, but [illegible] they answer to hear wi[illegible] spoke of the wells, I tell [illegible] your heads move apart as [illegible] and then, forsooth, that dotard Alt Pikker (who ran away in his youth from a monk's cloister school with the nun that taught them stocking mending) must needs furbish up some scraps of Latin and begin to prate about dog-stars red and dog-stars white. Faugh! Open your mouths like men, set truthful hearts behind them, and let me hear the worst!"

The three captains of Kernsberg were silent a while, for heaviness was upon their souls. Then Peter Balta blurted out, "God help us! There is but ten days' more provender in the city, the river is turned, and the wells are almost dried up!"

After this the Sparhawk sat awhile on the low window seat, watching the twinkling fires of the Muscovites and listening to the hum of the town beneath the Castle.

(To be continued.)

LOST THE BASS DRUM.

Absolute Proof That Such a Thing Is Possible.

The man who lost the bass drum has been found.

Newspaper paragraphers have made merry with the absent-minded man, and he has been accused of all sorts of deeds of omission and commission. Therefore some of the stories told at his expense have been taken in a Pickwickian sense. The tale that a man said he was so absent-minded that at one time he lost a bass drum has always been considered a mere joke.

Originally this story may have been a fable, but now it is true. A man has actually lost a bass drum, and all the members of an Iowa band will bear witness to the fact.

It happened near Davenport a few Sundays ago. There was a celebration at Davenport and an up country band had arranged to take part in the festivities. The train stopped at the station just a moment, and the members of the band piled into the smoker with their instruments and their regalia.

Just as the train was moving away a fat, red-nosed man grasped the rail and swung aboard. Then he turned pale and gasped.

"Where's my drum?" he cried, as his eyes bulged and his knees shook.

"I saw it on the depot platform," said the trombone player.

"Suffering cornhusks! I forgot it!"

When the band began business at Davenport it labored under a handicap, and the bass drummer was not a popular member of the aggregation.

Fighters.

Buckeye—How does it come that all these men I have met have the title of colonel?

Kentucklan—They are famous fighters, suh.

Buckeye—But I didn't know that Col. De Soaque was in the war.

Kentucklan—He wasn't. He is a famous boozefighter, suh!—Cleveland Leader.

ALONE AT CHRISTMASTIME

By S. BARING-GOULD

Is there—can there be—a man more lonely than one returned from a far country, who has been out of his home land for 20 years, and comes back when his parents are dead, his old friends dispersed, and the old nest has passed to other occupants? And can his loneliness be more emphasized than when his return syncronizes with Christmas?

That was my condition when I revisited the mother country. With a beating heart and straining eyes I had looked for the first sight of dear old America after having left it as a lad, hardly a man, some 20 years ago.

I was back—not to home—I had no home now. My heart began to fail me, my spirits decline, when I reached the little country town near which I had been born, and where I had fleeted the golden hours of childhood. No one knew me. In the churchyard I laid a wreath on the graves where lay dear old father and mother. I looked at our house. It had been rebuilt and was occupied by strangers.

"You Are Very Good."

I [illegible] through the village. The little shops had fresh names over them. The old rector who had baptized me was dead. The old school was gone. The ancient church had been renovated. The village inn was in new hands. The old Christmas was no more. No frost, no snow, no icicles; only sludge and a drizzling rain.

I returned from my visit to the village in deep depression. I would haste to the rooms I had taken in a house in the town, and spend my Christmas Eve with my pipe and glass—alone, with not even an old dog to lie at my feet and look up with speaking eyes into my face and sympathize with me in my solitude. I would pass the evening before the fire, looking into the red coals, not building castles among them, but watching the tumbling down of old cottages, old farms, old reminiscences, into ash.

I had done well in the other land, and had returned, not a rich man, but with a competence.

It had been my wish, my ambition, to settle in the village about which clung all my sweetest and holiest thoughts; to buy there a little land, to tread the old paths, ramble in the same woods, look upon the same scenes, dwell among the same people, re-make a home in the same place. But now—? Could it be?

As I walked back to my lodgings, through the street and by the market place, folk were hurrying in all directions, some with bunches of holly in their hands, a girl or two with a sprig of mistletoe slyly hid in her muff, a man wheeling a Christmas tree on a barrow, butchers' boys carrying joints for the morrow's dinner. Plum puddings and mince pies were displayed in the confectioners' shops. The chemist, the hairdresser, the seedsman, the draper had stuffed their windows with toys, toys, toys. He who had come to earth as a little child had filled every heart with thought of the little ones, and desire to make Christmas a day of joy to them. I had no tiny ones of my own, no little nieces and nephews, no small cousins for whom to provide anything. I was alone—utterly, desolately alone.

As I pursued my way I saw a tall, slim girl walking before me with a basket on her arm, and I noticed that the bottom had come out, and that the contents fell on the pavement. Of this she was unaware. I stooped and picked up a little woolly lamb, then—a something wrapped in paper—then a silver match box breaking out of its covering.

Gathering them together, I ran after the girl and stopped her.

"Excuse me," said I. "Are you a female Hop o' my Thumb, dropping tokens whereby your track my be known?"

I showed her what I had collected. She colored and thanked me. Then I recognized her as the daughter of my landlady.

"You must allow me," said I, "to tie my handkerchief round the basket, and to carry it for you. I believe that we go the same way."

"You are very good," she replied. "We are about to have a Christmas tree for the children this evening, and I have been making some trifling purchases as presents for my brothers and sisters, and for papa and mamma, who must not be forgotten."

"There go the candles!" I exclaimed, as a cataract of red, yellow and green tapers shot out of the basket.

"And there's an orange!" said she, as one of these fruit bounced forth and fell, and rolled away into the gutter.

We were forced to stoop and collect the scattered wax lights, and then to tie my large handkerchief about the basket.

"What a fortunate thing," said I, "that I have got a good sized 'kerchief in place of one of the miserable little rags that do service nowadays. That is, because I cling to old customs, and when I was a boy my mother always gave me something like a dish-cloth in my pocket."

Then we proceeded on our way, and when we went into the house, she received the basket from me, and again thanked me. "You must not remove the 'kerchief till all is unpacked," I said, "or there will be another discharge of the contents, and then the children will see what you have provided for them."

"Shall you be dining out to-morrow?" asked the girl.

"I—oh, no! I have none to dine with. I know no one here."

"And this evening. Shall you be going anywhere?"

"I—oh, no! I have nowhere whither to go."

So we parted, and I ascended to my room. I made up the fire, and sat down and reread the newspaper. There was much in it about the approaching feast. I had the illustrated papers. They had issued Christmas supplements, with pictures of happy family gatherings, of Old Father Christmas, of waits and carol singers. I might perhaps hear the waits and singers. I should certainly hear the Christmas bells. That would be all.

I had done with my papers. I sat before the fire in a brown study, and my spirits sank lower and ever lower. I recalled the old Christmases I had spent at home with my parents. I remembered how I had looked into my stockings on the morning to see if Old Father Christmas had visited me in the night and had left there some presents for the Good Boy.

Alas! No Father Christmas would visit me now. All that was of the past—the utterly and irrevocably past.

I did not light my candles. I could read no more. I needed no light for my thoughts, they were too dark to be illumined thus.

As I stood thus musing, I heard a tap at my door, and shouted: "Come in!" There ensued delay, and I called again: "Come in!"

Then the door opened and I saw some little heads outside, with golden curls and flushed cheeks, and a child's voice said: "Please, Mr. What's-your-name, will you come to our tree down stairs?"

"I!—I!"

As I hesitated, the child said: "Please—Annie told us to ask you."

And then I saw the tall girl whom I had assisted draw back into the dark behind them.

"Most certainly I will, as you are so kind as to invite me."

So I descended, and there were my landlord and landlady, radiant with happiness, and the five children danced before me and said: "He is come; is it not nice!" Behind, presently, entered Annie, somewhat shyly, and pretending she had come from the kitchen.

I was witness of the delight of the little ones over their presents—the

I Saw the Tall Girl.

woolly lamb, a small cart, a cannon, a doll—the father over a pair of warm stockings of Annie's knitting, the mother over a shawl, also of her work; and I stood smiling and happy, when up sprang one of the children and plucked from the tree the silver match box.

"This," said the child, "is for Mr. What's-his-name. Sister Annie said it was for him."

I was moved more than I can say. So—some had been thinking of me, though I was only a lodger.

"Look here, sir!" said the father, "you're a stranger in the country, and at such a time as this there must be no strangers. You must really sup with us, and dine also with us to-morrow. I can promise you a good dinner, for it is of Annie's making."

All was changed. I was a stranger and they took me in; I was lonely and they made of me a friend.

Christmas day, 10:30 p. m.

I returned to my room upstairs, made up the fire, and seated myself before it. I had spent a very pleasant day, and a pleasant evening before that. I did not now feel so discouraged, so hopeless. That was a nice family, very friendly and considerate. And I began to build in the fire. I no longer saw only ruins. I saw, as it were, a pleasant home rise out of the coals, and a pleasing face looked up at me out of them—very much like that of Annie. Ah! if the old home was gone, might I not build one that would be new. I need no longer live in the past, but look to the future, and next Christmas, please God—I would not be alone, that is if Annie—but I cannot say—will consent to put an end to my loneliness and help in building up a future.

THE TRUE CHRISTMAS SPIRIT

Of Interest to Stockholders.

Jaspar—I hear that Santa Claus has given up his yearly rounds.

Jumpuppe—You don't tell me!

Jaspar—Yes. He has accepted a regular position on the "Salaries Committees" of various big corporations.—Town Topics.